11SHORT.DOC 4-11-96

A letter from ranch people turned up in a stack of my family's pictures last week. "Turned back up" is more accurate. The body of the two letters, one from Ferdinand Noelke, the other from Patty Noelke Murphey, said the same thing: "everybody is feeding their sheep and cattle. Nobody expects to mark a good crop. The winds blow day and night. Uncle Tom says to tell you he has a bad cold."

Postmark on the envelope is Barnhart, Texas, dated March 22, 1916. At posting, Aunt Patty was a young woman, but great-grandfather Ferdinand had lived through plenty of weather failures and seen a big share of the bad lamb crops from Georgetown, Texas, out to the shortgrass country. Records show way back where he lost 600 ewes in a cold rain.

The important point, as the drouth rages out here in 1996, crumpling the baby lambs into dry skeletons and turning calves into dehydrated tissue, is that had I had the foresight of a ground mole, I'd have taken Grandpa's letter to heart at the first reading years ago. With a little more schooling, I could have become something useful, like a brakeman on the Sante Fe, or a gauger for Marathon Oil Company when the big strike blew in on the Pecos River.

The drouth this time has been a private matter between the ranchers and farmers, plus a neat array of players such as bankers and feed stores and hay truckers. But when grass fires broke out up close to Fort Worth and Dallas in February, the media began to write feature stories in the present tense of a drouth reaching back five years and a cattle market collapse some eight or nine months old. About the time the newspapers discovered the calamity, a hard ice storm the first of March seared the grassland as thoroughly as a treatment by a chemical herbicide. Where a glimmer of hope rested on sprigs of rescue grass and tender leaves of winter weeds from November rains, the hardy six minute grammas turned brown and gray. After the blizzard, the old cows' hair seemed to grow longer overnight and their eyeballs seemed to sink deeper in their sockets. The bawling of the herds became a moan, and rib bones stood out far enough to make an imprint on the dusty bed grounds.

The drouth going so public ended all avenues of escape from reality. I no longer was able to go to a dance or a concert in San Angelo without being reminded of the catastrophe. No sanctuary was left. "Wal, I don't guess it rained out Mertzon after the dust storm Monday, did it? Hee, hee, hee," they'd say.

Unable to respond, I'd think: "Oh, Father of Ultimate Mercy, if You do not think it is time to bring us rain, please occupy the bystanders, and send us orders for light calves." Usually, the silent movement of my lips disturbed the detractors enough, they'd rush back to the bar or seek another circle. The more determined struck off on the drouth of the 50s, following the same old theme of whether this one is as bad as those awful

days.

It's impossible, of course, for me to compare the two drouths until the current one breaks. In my case, the first drouth started in the fall of 1952. It ended in August of 1972 upon the payment of the last note for cubes and hay fed during the five-year holocaust. By 1992, my medical records over at Angelo Clinic noted a lower stress index, meaning the emotional damage of the 50s had dropped back to normal.

However, 1955 still stands out in my drouth years. I tried to cheat a herd of heifer calves through the winter on ground corn fashioned into chucks by cheap molasses and fed in troughs. Vitamin A deficiency caused the cattle to go blind, especially at night. The story becomes worse every time I tell the tale, but three or four calves stumbled off a bluff in the Stage Stand pasture on the Big Draw. One was killed and the other crippled.

If the Big Boss hadn't come to my rescue with a load of molded alfalfa hay out of Oklahoma, we'd have lost more of them, including what was left of our sanity. We never were sure whether the mildew in the hay or the slight trace of green left in the bales cured the cattle's blindness. Only one thing is certain about bad drouths: they don't end until your heart and your bankroll are broken.

The Texas section of a big financial journal laughed at mayors asking citizens to pray for rain. Be a pretty hollow laugh were those pundits to see tiny lambs wobbling off looking for their mothers and hairball calves trying to nurse every time their mother stands still.

Great grandfather ended his page of the letter written so long ago by saying: " It makes me too nervous to write any more."

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